WHO FEATURES

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WORLD IMMUNIZATION UPDATE

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that some 70% of the world's children under the age of one are now being immunized against the childhood diseases - diphtheria, measles, pertussis, poliomyelitis, tetanus and tuberculosis. By the year 2000, the goal of WHO is to increase worldwide immunization of infants to 90%.

"It is WHO's goal to provide immunization services for all children in the world", says Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of WHO.

Every minute, immunization is saving nearly five children from dying from measles, whooping cough or tetanus of the newborn (neonatal tetanus) by immunization - a total of 2.6 million deaths being averted annually. It is estimated that more than 400 000 cases of poliomyelitis are prevented each year by immunization.

These lives are being saved by the combined efforts of the 167 Member States of WHO, WHO's Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This effort is supported by governments, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Rockefeller Foundation, Rotary International, the Save the Children Fund, and other organizations.

Many heads of State or Government have become personally involved in national immunization activities because they know that vaccines are one of the most cost-effective and best forms of preventive medicine.

Because of the tremendous success of immunization programmes, WHO has targeted eradication of poliomyelitis by the year 2000, elimination of neonatal tetanus and reduction of cases of measles by 90% by 1995. These disease control targets will require increased attention to disease surveillance and increased resources for national immunization programmes.

Immunization coverage for the world stands at approximately 81% for tuberculosis; 74% for poliomyelitis (three doses); 72% for diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus - DPT vaccine (a combined immunization given in three doses); and 68% for measles vaccine. However, coverage of pregnant women with a second or booster dose of tetanus toxoid to protect their newborn children from tetanus stands at only 27%.

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Possibly the greatest achievement of the Expanded Programme on Immunization has been the development of the immunization services themselves. During the 1970s, most developing countries had almost no services at all. In the space of just 15 years, these countries have developed the management capability to deliver an estimated 2.5 million immunizations every day of the year.

The main reason for this global success is the massive immunization programmes in high population countries such as India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia. Other positive trends include a marked decline in drop-out rates (children missing second and third doses in the vaccination series), and the fact that public health officials are immunizing at every opportunity; instituting special activities such as national or local immunization days, weeks or months - as appropriate.

Annually, an estimated 46 million infants are still not fully immunized against these diseases, about 3.1 million children die, and a similar number are disabled.

Measles kills 1.4 million annually, or three children every minute. Tetanus kills 767 000 newborns a year. Every year, 46 million children contract pertussis (whooping cough) and 490 000 die. Each year there are 1.3 million cases of tuberculosis that kill 450,000 children under 15 years of age.

It costs about US$ 10-15 to fully immunize a child against these diseases. Thus, the annual cost of immunizing the approximately 130 million children born each year in the developing world is some US$ 1.5 thousand million. Approximately two-thirds of that cost is being met by the developing countries themselves. Public health officials try to raise the remaining one-third from donor states, foundations and nongovernmental organizations.

"Vaccines are one of our most cost-effective health tools," says Dr Nakajima. "Despite the recent progress, they remain under utilized in both industrialized and developing countries. Our challenge in the coming decade is to ensure that not even one child suffers needless death or disability because immunization services were not made available."

Estimated percentage of children immunized in the first year of life and percentage of pregnant women immunized against tetanus by WHO region, based on information available, June 1990

Region	Percentage of children im unized by 12 months of age				Percentage of pregnant women immunized
	BCG	DPT 3	POLIO 3	Measles*	Tetanus 2 +
African	67	47	47	47	25
America	73	69	87	73	29
South-East Asia	83	75	71	58	52
Europe	81	83	85	77	0
Eastern Mediterranean	79	74	74	70	31
Western Pacific	95	90	91	90	5
Global	81	72	74	68	27

* Coverage data for children up to 60 months are included for countries recommending immunization at, or later than, 12 months.

\+ Boosters incl·ded.

WHO is looking beyond these successes with immunization to other diseases to conquer. New vaccines are coming on the horizon, including for example vaccines against:

- o Rotavirus - causing 800 000 deaths of children from acute diarrhoea;
- o Respiratory syncytial virus - an infectious viral disease of the lower respiratory tract which kills 300 000 infants and children a year;
- o Meningococcal meningitis - 500 000 to one million cases annually with a 10% mortality rate; and
- o Dengue fever - an epidemic, infectious viral disease spread by mosquitos, infecting 30-60 million people yearly.

"If we assume that new and improved vaccines that become available during the decade of the 1990s would require at least an additional US$ 10 per fully immunized child", says Dr Robert Kim-Farley, Director of the WHO Expanded Programme on Immunization, "the bill for these additional vaccines would be about another US$ 1 thousand million annually. This amount would need to come from the industrialized countries".

Dr Kim-Farley would like to see the addition of currently available vaccines for yellow fever, hepatitis B and Japanese encephalitis to the routine immunization schedule in the appropriate countries.

GLOBAL TOLL FROM CHILDHOOD VACCINE-PREVENTABLE DISEASES
(1990 ESTIMATES)

Disease	Number of Cases	Number of Deaths
Tuberculosis	1.3 million	450 000
Measles	45 million	1.4 million
Pertussis (whooping Cough)	46 million	490 000
Tetanus (neonatal)	960 000	767 000
Poliomyelitis	189 000 cases	10 000 deaths

Source: World Health Organization - 1990

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